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Training on LGBTQ awareness is coming to private schools taking state money

By Jeffrey S. Solochek

One of Florida's leading LGBTQ rights groups is part of a new effort to provide "awareness training" for private schools that receive money through state-sponsored scholarships and voucher programs.

Equality Florida will team up with Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that helps administer five such programs, to teach the schools how to create a culture of inclusion and diminish the bullying, harassment and other factors that LGBTQ youth often encounter. The four-year initiative will be supported by \$1 million in private donations.

It comes months after a heated legislative battle over whether the state should ban private schools from receiving scholarships and vouchers if they have discriminatory policies. The debate followed an Orlando Sentinel investigation showing dozens of schools with written rules to deny admission to LGBTQ students, or to expel them if they tell someone at the school they're gay or transgender after being accepted.

Nadine Smith, executive director of Equality Florida, said her organization had not changed its position that legislation is needed to make clear that schools with such rules should not benefit from state-sponsored scholarships.

"The leadership in Tallahassee must address what is theirs to address," Smith said.

At the same time, she added, when the opportunity arises to improve the school culture where LGBTQ children might wish to attend, Equality Florida must help.

The arrangement with Step Up For Students "is opening doors that will end up moving us closer to that day when young people not only won't be experiencing harassment, but will have an environment where they can thrive," Smith said. "The contradiction would be for us to refuse to go into a school that is asking for help."

Step Up For Students president Doug Tuthill said his

group and Equality Florida have collaborated in the past, and this latest arrangement arose after nearly two years of conversation.

"We've always talked about ways we can work together to help kids in the scholarship program," whose numbers are nearing 150,000 and growing, he said. "It's really independent of the legislation."

Tuthill suggested that tackling problems within the schools, with leaders who want to make change, will lead to long-lasting mindset shifts. He said many of the private schools that accept the scholarships already welcomed LGBTQ youth, while others with discriminatory policies often did not recognize the offending language and did not implement it.

"Schools don't always have the expertise to help children going through dramatic changes in their lives," he said.

Five private schools have signed up to kick off the training program. None were identified as having anti-LGBTQ rules.

Two central Florida lawmakers who spearheaded the drive to strip scholarships from schools that have the offending policies praised the partnership for the work it wants to do.

Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-Orlando, observed that both parties came to the table as the debates raged in the Capitol to try to resolve the concerns that had some private corporate donors preparing to withdraw their financial backing.

The fact that the state's biggest purveyor of scholarships and vouchers has acknowledged the need for such training serves to highlight real problems among some private schools, Eskamani said. Voucher supporters should take note, she said.